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*Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen: A Homage*

By Orson Welles, Judith Thurman,  
Birgitte Price, and Florence Feiler

CALIFORNIA  
INSTITUTE OF

NOV 2 1983

TECHNOLOGY

OCTOBER 1983

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ISSUE 70 OCTOBER 1983  
SIX DOLLARS

ISAK DINESEN/KAREN BLIXEN:  
A HOMAGE

By Orson Welles, Judith Thurman,  
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This homage at the University of Southern  
California was moderated by Annet Wolf.

US ISSN 0047-8350  
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Cover: Isak Dinesen Other photographs in order:  
Birgitte Price  
Judith Thurman  
Florence Feiler

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## PREFACE

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Isak Dinesen's fame stands alone.

But its new surge is not only a tribute to her as a fine writer. It also comes from the indefatigable efforts of Morton and Florence Feiler, attorney and literary agent par excellence, in both protecting the name of Isak Dinesen and in giving thousands the pleasure of her writing.

Mrs. Feiler has spoken to many audiences about Isak Dinesen and has encouraged many tributes to that great Danish lady out of Africa.

We are grateful to Florence Feiler and her friends for permission to publish the seminar held at the University of Southern California earlier this year.

The tributes to Isak Dinesen in many countries, most recently by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, continue to pour forth. The proceeds from use of "Tania's" stories accrue to the Rungstedlund Foundation, named for the Dinesen family seat in Denmark.

There are high hopes that a new option on *Out of Africa* will finally result in a film worthy of that lyrical, if anguished, description of life on a coffee farm in Kenya between the wars.

This editor was pleasantly surprised to hear from Clara Svendsen Selborn, who wrote after reading my account of our mutual friend Robert Ardrey in *Touched by Africa*, that Bob had written a script of the famous novel.

We are honored to be able to pay homage to a writer who deserved, as Ernest Hemingway said, the Nobel Prize in Literature. We particularly hope that the renaissance genius of Orson Welles will be tapped in bringing the stories of Isak Dinesen to a greater audience.

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Note: We are grateful to Patricia Lile and Susan McCloud for their editorial assistance.

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## *Isak Dinesen/Karen Blixen: A Homage*

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Danish born Annet Wolf continues to be a director/producer for 25 years. She has produced film, TV, and stage, — mainly in Europe. She was the moderator of this program.

### **Annet Wolf:**

Isak Dinesen was a personality that to me would always remain as a lady full of surprises. But tonight we have a legend with us, a legend who doesn't need any introduction. He is the world of art from the world over. With the many, many years of his enchantment of Isak Dinesen, he has also purchased, "Dreamers" and "Echoes" and will soon produce and direct both of these special, special short stories from her novels. And, ladies and gentlemen, with no further ado I would like very much, and I'm very proud to introduce to you the magical Mr. Welles.

### **Orson Welles:**

Good evening. I don't know why I should pretend that I'm speaking to thousands. Karen Blixen, who will always be Isak Dinesen to me, had a public about as small as this when her first book first appeared in America — and it was in America that it appeared. But in a few hours she was approaching the best seller list at the top insofar as anybody that great could ever get in to that division. And it was a success she didn't know about, as you realize, until much later. But we who speak to living audiences, however, have the shocking proof of how well we're doing when we look out over a sea of smiling faces and realize that we can count them on the fingers of a couple of hands.

I once lectured with H. G. Wells. We used to tour around debating and we'd toss a coin which subject we'd talk on and which side we'd take on which subject. We'd finished our tour and somebody said, "Play Kansas City," but he wanted to get back to the blitz which was going on in London which he didn't think he ought to miss. And we went to Kansas City but at the last minute, H. G. went to London, and I was alone.

I faced the biggest storm which has ever been heard of. They had ropes across the street to get to the auditorium — I think it's called the Cow Palace — which holds about 30,000 people. And when I got there, there wasn't a nice lady to introduce me. There was just a man hanging onto the rope who said, "Hey! You better get out there, buddy." And I got out there, and I heard myself announcing myself. I gave him my name, and I said that I had a theater in New York, and a radio program, and I wrote and directed and acted, and I designed scenery, and

that I was a musician and a painter, and then I said, "I'm only sorry that there are so many of me and so few of you."

I found myself repeating that sentiment tonight in the name of a lady with whom I have been passionately in love with since I bought her first book. I suppose you are her lovers too. There are millions of them. They just don't happen to be here tonight.

I tried to do a story of hers called *The Old Chevalier* very early on. I tried to do a movie called "Paris by Night" with Alexander Korda and he negotiated, or told me he negotiated, the rights for *The Old Chevalier*. I wrote a script for it. That never happened. And then I tried to do about four or five other stories and never got them on the screen. Many years later I made *The Immortal Story* and that was a huge commercial success in every place in the world and a critical success here, but it drew a public somewhat similar to the one I am addressing tonight. It was too short and nobody spent any money on the advertising — a message which we can all take to heart.

I wrote a letter to Karen Blixen. I guess we better call her that tonight. I began it one year, and I was still writing it three years later. It got to be longer than anything she'd ever written. I was trying to explain why I should dare to intrude on her attention, and I never satisfied myself so I tore up the letter. And then a little while later I went to Denmark without any invitation to see her.

And there I met two people who knew her. They had a story which was almost a Dinesen story. They had both been underground — they had both been partisans during the war and the husband had not told the wife that he was a member of the partisan group and the wife had not told the husband. They only found it out after the war. And with such a couple to take me, I was looking forward to that trip down the road to Elsinore. But I found I couldn't sleep that night.

Here is the end of that story, and a little more, which I had written for a movie I am going to make, a full length movie based on "The Dreamers" and "The Echoes" combined. I decided I was going to read this piece myself before the movie began. And then I decided it might be a little pompous, so Warren Beatty's going to do it for me in a slightly different version; but I ask you to bear with me while I read it.

When they brought the news to Ernest Hemingway that he'd been given the Nobel Prize for literature, he said it should have gone to Isak Dinesen. She was a Dane who wrote under that name and I'd been in love with her since I'd opened her first book. In life she was the Baroness Blixen and to her close friends she was Tania. I'd known some of those friends, and I'd never stop pumping them for every morsel of information, every memory of her, however slight. I wrote a letter to her once and when I was done, it was a perfect mountain of pages, every one of which I have carefully destroyed. One day I took a plane to Copenhagen to visit her. She was living then in the same old house where she was born and where she died.

Hamlet's *Elsinore* is just a few miles up the road. I had friends who knew her well. I've told you that I've spent a sleepless night. I tell you now that at day-break, I took the first plane out of Denmark.

What could a casual and uninvited visitor presume to offer — except his stammered thanks? The visitor would be a bore. And the lover was too humble and too proud for that. I had only to keep silent and our love affair would last on the most intimate terms for as long as I had eyes to read print.

Her true love was a legend: Denys Finch-Hatton. Forty years after his plane had crashed on his way home to her in the African highlands, I heard people speaking of him at a dinner party in Rome. And an old English countess seated next to me wept silent tears at the mention of his name. Isak Dinesen has written that whenever he returned to her from one of his safaris, there was one thing he would never fail to call out to her before he even reached the house: "Have you got a story?" And of course she always did. These were the stories she would write years later when she was back in Denmark.

I haven't envied many men, but there is almost nothing that I wouldn't give to have spent one of those evenings on her farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills. She would, she tells us, have been sitting cross-legged — *Scheherazade* herself — telling her long tale from where it began to where it ended.

\* \* \*

I must ask these lovely ladies who are seated here to forgive me and the audience to forgive what not only appears to be rudeness but *is* rudeness; but I was only able to come here if I would promise the dinner party to which I'd been invited that I'd be there in time for dessert. And so I leave you for the sweets, and thank you for your kind attention.

## **Annet Wolf:**

It is very difficult to go on after this, but we would like to, of course. We have some very extraordinary company tonight. Judith Thurman took it upon herself to write a biography. There is nothing more difficult in the world, practically, than to write biographies. We have seen that proven again and again. Today I saw a review of Judith Thurman's "majestic biography." It is a beautiful, beautiful book.

It is, of course, also very courageous. So many people have their ideas and thoughts about Karen Blixen — especially the Danes. All we (or we who are Danes) who read it, totally, totally, approve. It is very beautiful.

And there's also a very, very dear friend of mine here today. We grew up together back home. We worked together at the same theater. Her husband was my teacher. So what else can I say but, a wonderful friend is in town — but also a magnificent actress — one of whom we're very, very proud — one who has done theater and has done the classics, done contemporary, is a wizard in the musical world, and is now not only herself continuing to act, but is also a wonderful director. I would like now to introduce to you, Judith Thurman and Birgitte Price. (Ms. Thurman is the author of *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*. The biography, which took eight years of work, won the American Book Award for biography. Birgitte Price is a distinguished actress and stage director of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.)



**Birgitte Price/Dinesen:** Excerpt *Out of Africa*, p. 93

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The Equator runs across these highlands, a hundred miles to the North, and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the day-time you felt that you had got high up, near to the sun, but the early mornings and evenings were limpid and restful, and the nights were cold.

The chief feature of the landscape, and of your life in it, was the air. Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air. The sky was rarely more than pale blue or violet, with a profusion of mighty, weightless ever changing clouds towering up and sailing on it. But it has a blue vigour in it, and at a short distance it painted the ranges of hills and the woods a fresh deep blue. In the middle of the day the air was alive over the land, like a flame burning; it scintillated, waved and shone like running water, mirrored and doubled all objects, and created great Fata Morgana. Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.



**Judith Thurman:**

A brief and informal word before I begin. The quality that Isak Dinesen admired most is gallantry. It's a rare quality to find in our day and age and it's embodied in Orson Welles to an extraordinary degree. And I was struck when he walked in tonight that this was a figure from one of Dinesen's tales and it is a great privilege for me. I was moved, so I'm going to talk over the lump.

I was also pleased that he called Dinesen, *I - sak* Dinesen, because I've become very self-conscious and I now pronounce her name *E - sak* but throughout the seven years that I've worked on the book I've called her Issac to myself, partly because Isaac is the Biblical name that I grew up thinking of, and partly because in Denmark, she was known as Karen Blixen or Tana. In Africa she was known as Tania. And it was really *here* that she was *E - sak* or *I - sak* Dinesen. So that was also rather nice, and I've started saying *E - sak* because so many people correct me.

Isak Dinesen was a story teller. She was not a novelist. She was not a writer of short stories. She was a member of, what she would like to call, an ancient, idle, wild and useless tribe. She had written stories as a young girl and one of them, several of them, were published in a literary review and she had written poetry. But she started writing in earnest when she had lived long enough to make a reckoning with her losses rather than through the continuous exercise of her craft.

Her life had more shape than most lives. It was three lives. There is a girlhood that ended when she married and went to Africa. There is what she called her *vita nuova*, which is her eighteen years on the coffee farm. And then there was, what was in some ways, an afterlife, when she lost everything, and she closed a parentheses, and she returned to Denmark and she began to write.

She said of her tales — and it's true of her life — that nemesis is the central principle of them. It's there, everywhere. A nemesis is that thread in the course of events that is determined by the psychic assumptions of people. I think you can call the thread "desire" and the needle that draws it "necessity." And that is how a life like that of Isak Dinesen or a myth, or a tale, or a dream — as opposed to a realistic form — get its many folds.

I don't know how many of you are intimately familiar with the forces that formed her. So I thought that I would begin by reading, not too long, the introduction to this biography which would give you a sense of structure.

*Isak Dinesen - The Life of a Storyteller, p. 6.*

Isak Dinesen was born to two people who embodied very different attitudes to life. The Westenholtzes, her mother's family, were exemplary bourgeois. The men of the family were traders, self-made millionaires; rich by their own adroitness, hard work, and frugality. The women were high-minded and accomplished. They were also — which was rare — passionate feminists and nonconformists, converts to the Unitarian Church. But while it was an immensely vigorous family, it was not a vital one. Their energies went into practical or abstract projects, and mostly toward their own moral excellence. Life was like a long and costly mortgage to them; they were debtors in relation to existence, slowly paying off their souls.

The symmetry is not perfect, for her father's people were by no means a band of decadents or esthetes, nor were they titled. But where the Westenholtzes were urban, literate, and squeamish, the Dinesens were country people — affable and lavish — and cousins to the greatest noblemen in the kingdom. The men tended to be virile and opinionated, the women elegant and pretty, and by Westenholtz standards somewhat "frivolous and shallow." They did not feel bound to leave a mark upon the world but had



an aristocratic confidence of their place in it: a sense that "existence itself was obviously inherited," with no moral liens. Their hands were free. Isak Dinesen remembered them to have, and felt she had inherited, "a great wild joy at being alive."

From her childhood Isak Dinesen saw the two families as antitheses, one infinitely alluring, the other infinitely problematic. She steadfastly claimed that she was "not like" her mother's family and that they disliked her. She rebelled at their contempt and fear of the erotic, and at the relentless surveillance that had enforced it, depriving her childhood of its rightful charge. In this revolt, the central drama of her life, her father was an ally and an inspiration. While he lived, which was not long, he rescued her from the Westenholzes physically, and after his death he continued to act as the emissary of life's dangerous powers. Indeed, where Isak Dinesen uses the word "life," it is often synonymous with the word "father."

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 110, Ngong, Autumn, 1921

I think my greatest misfortune was Father's death. Father understood me as I was, although I was so young, and loved me for myself. . . . I feel that Mama and Aunt Bess and the whole of your family, — if they care for me at all, do so in a way in spite of my being as I am. They are always trying to change me into something quite different; they do not like the parts of me that I believe to be good.

**Thurman:**

Wilhelm Dinesen committed suicide when his daughter Tana was ten years old. After that she felt that she had been stranded with her mother's family. And she often described her environment as a kind of parsonage where the view was always to the salvation of your soul and you couldn't have any fun. She was drawn to the Dinesens and she visited them and she loved and adored her aristocratic cousins, the Frijes who were first cousins to the Dinesens. And she spent as much time as she could at their balls and parties and wanted to have a title herself and her own lady's maid. In years later, she studied art, and she acquired a number of accomplishments, but she blamed her family because they had somehow not prepared her to *be* something. They hadn't prepared her for real life.

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 250, April 3, 1926

But isn't it frightful that honorable people can allow someone to grow up, — merely because they belong to the female sex, — without learning *anything at all*? I believe that I was of above average intelligence as a child and I was *eager to learn*, mathematics, for instance I really think I had a talent for that; but while my family was eager to teach me moral conduct and unselfishness it never occurred to them to have me taught more arithmetic than Miss Zøylner could manage. Mama and Miss Zøylner were my teachers, and from the time we returned to Switzerland, — where we had learned nothing at all, — and I was fourteen. I learned absolutely nothing. Even though they knew, — which was never really clear to me, — that I would not be in such a position that would allow me to live without *earning anything myself*. Of course I should have decided for myself; but here again I met with that strange opposition to everything that was in any way outside the narrow circle of home, and the peculiar power they had of always making one feel in

the wrong when one stood out against them. What were they thinking of? I suppose they really thought that our future lay in marriage. If only they had arranged that properly. I do not think it would have been at all hard to marry me off; I think that a good match, an estate, for instance, would have tempted me a lot. But I was given no chances. For we never met any good matches. . . .

But it would have hardly been possible to air the idea of a marriage of convenience at home. It is as if they seemed to put their trust in love. But should a person's future be left entirely to a feeling like that? And what if one never comes to fall in love? Or falls in love and is not loved in return? Or falls in love and is loved? Is it right to come to it entirely empty-handed, without resources of any kind, without oneself knowing, or having learned, anything? Even *married life* itself has a practical side. We knew nothing of house-keeping, accounts, how to entertain. And we were cut off so much from the world that we had nothing at all to hang on to that could give us a start; . . .

### Judith Thurman:

That very feminist anger in the letter does not, I'm afraid to say, carry over into the later works of Isak Dinesen in which she declared that one's real worth is determined by the opposite sex. And there is always the paradox with her that this is the voice of her young womanhood, and as an old woman she took a more worldly, cynical view perhaps, of the relations between the sexes. Considering that she believed that one's worth lies with the opposite sex, she wasn't very clever about the members of the opposite sex with whom she sought to establish her worth with.

The man that she first fell in love with was Hans Blixen—Baron Blixen—her second cousin, a dashing flyer, cavalry officer, one of the most desirable and glamorous young men of his generation. He happened to have a twin brother named Bror. Hans did not return her passion.

And when she announced her engagement to Bror a few years later, people were shocked at this gesture, which they thought was rather maudlin. They couldn't understand, and they complained that she was being insincere and that she was throwing herself away. But, in fact, it wasn't the absurd and in a way unworthy marriage that it may have seemed, because Bror and Tana conspired together to escape Denmark and Sweden in their respective constraining situations; the way two prisoners might have sided—thrown into a cell by chance, who size each other up and realize the only way they are going to get out is to do it together. And Bror was quite the fine figure of a man (so I'm told on the highest authority—by his second wife). So when the chance came, she seized it. Their wealthy relatives underwrote a coffee plantation for them in Africa, and Bror went out ahead to set things up and Tana followed late in 1913.

The next man who entered her life was named Farah Aden. He was a Somali and he was her servant. But she had a close intimacy with Farah which bewildered the English and they only thought that there could be one thing going on and didn't really understand the closest of her—I mean the most meaningful of her—relations. She had a covenant with her father. She would have, later on, a covenant with the poet—the Danish poet, Thorkild Bjørnvie. And it was a rela-

tion of dependence and trust that didn't change despite the vicissitudes of life. Farah, despite the gossip, was her servant. They were not equals. There was not the relationship of mutual understanding and attraction that she had had, perhaps once in her life, before with her father.

She could not find that again until in 1918 she met the Honorable Denys Finch-Hatton, younger son of the Earl of Winchelsea. (Another flyer and hunter and glamorous figure and trader — the object of everyone's desire who, of himself, would never be possessed.) He had an aversion to possessiveness. He had an aversion to attachments. He lived his life exactly the way it suited him. He came for pleasure, not for pity, as he once told her. Very kindly. And Denys did answer all of the yearning and all of the desire she had in her being. They were not often together, but when they were, it was very intense.

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 66, Bogani, 6 April 1918

I went to a very enjoyable dinner yesterday at Muthaiga in Nairobi. We were just four, the previous Governor's daughter and an unusually *charming* person Dennis Finch-Hatton whom I have always heard so much about but never met before.

*Letters From Africa*, p. 67, Ngong, May the 17, 1918

Last Sunday we had a very good hunt for General Llewellyn. We were only the General, Major Davis and his wife, Eric, Captain Gorringe, Van de Weyer, Finch-Hatton, Bror, and myself; . . . . Next day I went into Nairobi with Finch-Hatton for lunch. . .

I am really sad that he's gone; it is seldom that one meets someone one is immediately in sympathy with and gets along so well with, — and what a marvelous thing talent and intelligence is. Then a certain class of Englishmen that have an extraordinary pleasant nature; . . . I think it is great good fortune for a country to have a class of people who have nothing other to do than follow their own bent, and who have been brought up to observe the phenomena of life from above, . . . . In Denmark, where everyone has grown up in the same restricted conditions I think it would be a good thing to have a little injection of different ways of thinking now and again; out here one sometimes feels that most people's horizon at home is restricted to an unfortunate extent.

**Judith Thurman:**

One of the freedoms that Karen Blixen (now that she's in Africa I can call her Karen Blixen) had — in Kenya in those days — was an unusual degree of sexual freedom. There is still something called serial monogamy which, as Californians, you all know very well. And it was not frowned upon at all for a woman to have lovers and for a young woman to have sexual relations; and this, for someone brought up by Puritans the way Isak Dinesen was, was immodesty. Her marriage continued. She took an eighteenth century attitude toward it. She was Bror's wife. He was her husband. They went their separate ways. They both paid homage — she more than he — to this ideal of being married. At least that's how she saw it in the beginning before he asked her for a divorce. And, for a

while, Denys came; and they had their great love and things worked out. It was a struggle.

She understood what she said as a young woman—that you must have your own life before you can really be in love. You must run parallel to your lover, not try to merge with him all the time. You cannot live through men. You cannot live through a child. She began to see that this was the way her mother had tried to live: through her—and her grandmother through her mother—and this is what perpetuates through the generations—a bond of dependence that was impossible for a woman to break and escape from.

But Bror, who was not the world's most sensitive human being, didn't see it as this eighteenth century relationship, and didn't have her fidelity to the ideal. He was broke. He fell in love with someone else. Everyone, all their friends, urged them to divorce. He was never there. They didn't understand why she didn't want to. Her brother Thomas would come out to Africa—was appalled at the way Bror behaved and he said, "You must! You must divorce him." He had run up debts. The shareholders of the farm who were all members of her family urged it in letters that were insistent and annoyed her and humiliated her, and infuriated her. And finally, she saw that it was inevitable.

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 122 January the twenty-third, 1982

### **My own beloved mother:**

I want to write and give you some sort of explanation of my relationship with Bror since I came back. What I think now that we are in fact going to be divorced, and there is no need for this to be kept secret, although I am reluctant to have it mentioned to outsiders. This development has come about because Bror wishes it, and because he seems to think he can manage better in the future if we are divorced, and probably believes that he will be happier then.

[He's probably going to be married as soon as it can be arranged to an English lady who wants to help him.]

When I see how close Thomas and I have grown during this past year, which after all is only a fraction of the time that Bror and I have spent together here, I am quite unable to comprehend the state of mind of anyone who can cancel such a relationship.... But where this is concerned Bror's temperament is completely different from mine;— I think that in some way he can wipe out an entire period of time and an entire emotion from his consciousness and direct all his concentration on the present moment and on what is to come. . . .

In any case, it is my heartfelt hope that he will be happy.

You must know how hard this is for me. In many ways my relationship with Bror was a problematic task,—one that I believed to be the most important in my life,—and that I have been quite unable to fulfill. As you know, I put into it a great deal of both time and effort. It could no doubt be said that I had ought to have given it up earlier; but I do not think that would have been possible for me, and things had to take the course that they have. But much of my youth and my strength has gone into it, and I think something of my soul. And yet this is far from what I feel most strongly about; but I have cared indescribably much for Bror in spite of everything, and for many years he has been the person that I was closest to in the world. There is something terribly bitter in the realization that now there is, if one is to face it, nothing left at all of our relationship. And yet

you must not think that I am bitter; I think that I feel much more as one does if one has a child who dies.

I'm bound to say that it is very hard to look back at the whole period of one's life and have to admit: it came to nothing. But apart from this, and the actual pain of parting from someone I have loved so much, I think I will come to feel it as a relief from many impossible situations. . . .

I think so often of those words in the Bible: "I will not let thee go before thou blessest me." I think there is such deep meaning, something so glorious in them; I almost take it to be my "motto" in this life. I feel that it applies so profoundly to all circumstances, to everything that one experiences, even where this farm and this land are concerned, although no doubt you may find it laughable, come back to it. The hardest thing for me has been that I have been unable to carry it through in my marriage, — although it really was as good friends that Bror and I parted.

But I do consider also that when one says these words, then one must agree and consent to let go of that which really has given one its blessing. For it happens almost every day of one's life that a time, a circumstance is past; one cannot struggle against that. But when one has received a blessing, one has that to keep that can never be lost. . . .

### **Judith Thurman:**

When Isak Dinesen wrote those words, she had just had a miscarriage. She had been pregnant and she was with Denys's child and she very much wanted the baby. She had syphilis, which she got from Bror in the first year of their marriage, and that made it almost impossible for her to have another pregnancy. Around this time, her struggles with Bror (due to his absence) and the difficulties of running his plantation, and the altitude that wasn't suited to it due to lack of enough rainfall were almost overwhelming for her. She struggled with terrible depressions. She was a very, very strong person. The depressions were very strong, but she somehow was determined to survive them. Suicide crossed her mind from time to time, but she wouldn't give in.

She went home to Denmark and she listened to the platitudes and she was lectured on economy and the family threatened to sell the farm out from under her and she fought back more bitter, more determined, arrogant, sure that she knew the best way. She was very stubborn. And she, I think, needed that stubbornness in the family — a very strong willed and opinionated people; but the 20's in Africa were not. When you read *Out of Africa* you see everything from a great distance. When you read *The Letters*. . . , you see everything from very close up — in a tremendous ambivalence and pain that the reality had.

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 248.

Continued further April 19, 1926.

To begin with where I left off, I tried to give you an impression of my situation as it is of this moment April 26.

Denys has been here for a fortnight and is now going home to Europe, that is, I expect him to be here tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and then he is to leave from Nairobi on Tuesday.

During the time he has been here I have, as on similar occasions previously, been in a

state of quite perfect bliss mixed with a state of quite perfect despair, at the thought that he is leaving again so soon and that I may possibly never see him again.

The results of these varying states of mind is complete awareness that he is the only person who means anything to me in life and that my whole existence revolves around this relationship as around an axis, which means that it offers the possibilities of what is called heaven or hell, with very abrupt transitions.

But I will not, and cannot continue to go on living in this way, with this single element in my life, it is an intolerable situation and I find it impossible to allow my immediate future to take the form of six months of utter desolation, emptiness and darkness, with hope of seeing him again in the autumn, and being lifted up to the same unqualified happiness, only to be cast back into desolation and darkness — and so on and so on for infinity.

I know that you have said that it is worth being utterly miserable for some time and then having this followed by utter happiness. From a purely mathematical point of view this might well produce a balance, for instance if someone agreed to lie in a perfumed bath and listen to the loveliest music in the world for six hours, and then to be put on the rack for the next six (and so on); but in practice this is quite simply impossible as a *modus vivendi* because one cannot thus isolate oneself from past and future; before very long one's whole existence would turn into chaos and destroy one.

I doubt that it is feasible at all to "live on" a passion, as the saying goes, — I mean, that one could do it for more than a short space of time. But even if that were so, this relationship is not at all merely a passion; it should comprise and include far, far more. If this relationship should come to be my only possession in life, if I should come to be completely empty-handed, without any other interests, experiences, new ideas, or impressions, then it would change from being the most joyful friendship, the loveliest sympathy and understanding I can imagine, into a purely physical hunger and its satisfaction, and I will not allow that to happen; and anyway it would never last only in that manner, it would burn out *in no time*.

No, you see, I must *be myself*, be something in myself, have, own something that is really mine, achieve something that is mine and is me, in order to be able to live at all, and in order to be able to have, and hope to continue to have, the indescribable happiness in my life that my love for Denys is to me. And I do not have that here, now, — I have and am nothing at all; I have betrayed my angel Lucifer and sold my soul to the angels in Paradise, and yet I cannot live in it; I don't belong. I have no place to be anywhere in the world, and yet I must stay in it; I hate and dread each minute, and yet they come, one after the other; in short, it is sure misery, and if I came to hear about it I would not believe it possible to live in such a manner.

### Judith Thurman:

By the end of the twenties, it was clear to everyone that Karen Blixen's coffee farm was going under. She was the last one to accept it. She fought it. She refused. She stood her ground. Denys, who was very rich, didn't really — and in a way, perhaps couldn't — really provide the money that was needed to bail out. He loaned her a hundred pounds here and there to tide her over against the security of her silver; and finally the farm was sold to a developer who wanted to turn it into a suburb of expensive homes and to build a country club which he wanted to name The Karen Country Club, and he, in fact, did name it The Karen Country Club and he named the suburb after her. He made what he felt was a generous offer. He said, "Baroness Blixen, you can stay in your house

for as long as you like." And she said, "Mr. Martin, I would rather live in an acre in the middle of the Sahara."

She was extremely concerned, once the farm was sold, that she find a piece of land large enough to accomodate all the Africans who had worked for her with all their families and all of their cattle, and from whom they thought the land had been appropriated in the first place. She began making the rounds of the government offices in Nairobi asking for this piece of land. And when this sin — this farce in a way — is described, colonialists who I met in Nairobi said, "Do you realize how insane it was in those days to go and to ask for a piece of land in Kenya on where you could accomodate two thousand Africans, thousands of heads of cattle and all the children all in one place?!" She was mad. And Ingrid Lindstrom who was her great friend said to me that when she got it, it was as bizarre as Queen Victoria offering Mt. Kilimanjaro to Kaiser Wilhelm. Now you laugh, and so did I, but then I found out that Queen Victoria *did* offer Mt. Kilimanjaro to Kaiser Wilhelm. Each of the colonial powers wanted a snow-capped mountain so Queen Victoria kept Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro went to the Kaiser.

Karen Blixen started breaking up her house and selling her possessions and people would come out and look them over and haggle over them.

Denys, about this time (because he never came for pity, but for pleasure) decided that it would be more convenient to move into town where he could be near a dentist. There were other reasons. She became — the sense of loss, the sense of immanence of this great loss made her — bad-tempered and very possessive. And her friends said that there was a very great rift between them. It might have been over another woman. They wouldn't say for sure. It might have been over Denys's unwillingness to buy her out, and it might have been over her increase in possessiveness which she could no longer hide. But, in any case, they did quarrel and Denys took back a gold ring that he'd given her for Christmas.

They were sort of reconciled. And he was going to go on a scouting excursion in his plane. He was going to look for some elephant around Voi and she very much wanted to make this one last trip down the coast with him and come back and he said, "No, my dear, I'm going to be only in the bush and the train will be very rough, and you know your health has been very bad." She was very ill. Part of it was syphilis. Part of it was amoebic dysentery. Part of it was that she was not eating and not sleeping — being a wreck. So she didn't go.

## Telegram Received from Nairobi.

**Price/Dinesen:** *Letters From Africa*, p. 430

RECEIVED 15TH MAY, 1931  
TELEGRAPH STATION  
COPENHAGEN O  
DENYS KILLED FLYING FOURTEENTH  
BURIED NGONG HILLS TODAY  
TANIA \*\*

**Price/Dinesen:** *Out of Africa*, p. 346.

Denys, who held himself by being an extremely rational person, was subject to special kind of moods and forebodings, and under their influence at times he became silent for days or for a week, though he did not know of it himself and was surprised when I asked him what was the matter with him. The last days before he started on this journey to the coast, he was in this manner absent-minded, as if sunk in contemplation, but when we spoke of it, he laughed at me.

I asked him to let me come with him, for I thought what a lovely thing it would be to see the Sea. First he said yes, and then he changed his mind and said no. . . . This is the only time that I had asked Denys to take me with him in his own plane, but he wouldn't do it.

He went off Friday the eighth: "Look out for me on Thursday," he said when he went, "I shall be back in time to have luncheon with you."

When he had started in his car for the aerodrome in Nairobi, and had turned down the drive, he came back to look for a volume of poems that he had given to me, and that he now wanted with him on his journey. He stood with one foot on the running-board of the car, and a finger in the book, reading out to me a poem that we had been discussing. "Here are gray geese," he said:

I saw gray geese flying over the flatlands  
Wild geese vibrant in the high air  
Unswerving from horizon to horizon  
With their soul stiffened out in their throats  
And the gray whiteness of them ribboning the enormous skies  
And the spokes of the sun over the crumpled hills."

Then he drove away for good, waving his arm to me. . . .

I looked out for Denys on Thursday, and reckoned that he would fly from Voi at sunrise and be two hours on the way to Ngong. But when he did not come, and I found that I had got things to do in Nairobi, I drove in to town.

Whenever I was ill in Africa, or much worried, I suffered from a special kind of compulsive idea. It seemed to me then that all my surroundings were in danger or distress, and that in the midst of this disaster I myself was somehow on the wrong side, and therefore was regarded with distrust and fear by everybody.

On this Thursday in Nairobi the nightmare unexpectedly stole upon me, and grew so strong that I wondered if I were beginning to go mad. There was somehow, a



deep sadness over the town, and over the people I met, and in the midst of it everybody was turning away from me. There was nobody who would stop and talk to me, my friends, when they saw me, got into their cars and drove off. Even old Mr. Duncan, the Scotch grocer, from whom I had bought groceries for many years, and with whom I had danced at the big ball at Government House, when I came in looked at me with a kind of fright and left his shop. I began to feel as lonely in Nairobi as on a desert island.

.... But, I was to lunch with Lady MacMillan at Chiromo, and I thought that there I should find people to talk to, and get back my balance of mind.

I drove up to the lovely old Nairobi house of Chiromo, at the end of the long bamboo avenue, and found a luncheon party there. But it was the same thing at Chiromo as in the streets of Nairobi. Everybody seemed mortally sad, and as I came in the talk stopped. I sat beside my old friend Mr. Bulpett, and he looked down and said only a few words.

I thought: "These people are no good to me," I will go back to the farm. Denys will be there by now. We will talk and behave sensibly, and I shall be sane again and know and understand everything.

But when we had finished luncheon, Lady MacMillan . . . told me that there had been an accident at Voi. Denys had capsized with his machine, and had been killed in the fall.

It was then, as I have thought: at the sound of Denys's name even, truth was revealed, and I knew and understood everything.

### **Judith Thurman:**

I was going to try to sum up, after that, something of Isak Dinesen's career as a writer, but I don't think it's possible. I think that what makes her such a great story teller in essence is that loss is present everywhere in her work. It is mastered. It is transcended. And what you come away with is a conviction that it is not the ups and downs, the vicissitudes, the suffering, the pain and the tragedy and the moments of "maybe" and the moments of disillusionment that count. It's experience itself. And if you believe that, you have the courage to go on and to do anything.

And this was the courage that Isak Dinesen won, earned, eeked out for herself. But she held up as an example in her work. I think it's what gives her work its extraordinary power: to console, while we all take *Out of Africa* with us when we travel; and why the work endures despite the changes in fashion and the attitudes of people—the differences that people have with their politics.

She herself had one ambition. She was often accused of being a decadent. And she said, "That is no doubt true, as I am not interested in social questions nor in Freudian Psychology. But the narrator of *A Thousand and One Nights* also neglected social questions."

It is also, no doubt, for that reason that today the Arabs still gather in the public squares to hear her stories. "As for me, I have one ambition only. To invent stories." Very beautiful stories.

### **Annet Wolf:**

Our last guest is a very special lady whom I have had the pleasure of knowing for a couple of years. Who has been, since 1962, if I am not wrong, the protector of Isak Dinesen all over the world; and more than anywhere else, in the United

States. Florence Feiler stands to, anyone who has met her, as Isak Dinesen's guardian angel. The Isak Dinesen estate never knew — before they knew Mr. Feiler and Mrs. Feiler — anything about what they really had: this extraordinary wonder of Isak Dinesen, all the wonderful books, all these stories from this incredible storyteller. So, Florence Feiler, we thank you for having kept this dream alive for all of us. And I now give the way to you.



### **Florence Feiler:**

Many years ago I had the good fortune to become acquainted with the works of Isak Dinesen. A friend willed me her library and among the treasures, I found *Seven Gothic Tales* — truly a gift from the gods.

From my husband, who was the attorney for the Rungstedlund Foundation, I inherited the opportunity to represent them, as well. So, you see, I have been doubly blessed, as is every person who has read her books.

There is always an invisible magnetic bond between a superb story teller and the audience. Isak Dinesen created such a bond. Those who listened to her tell her tales were enchanted by her personality, her charisma, and her astounding ability — in spite of her fragile appearance — to charm and enrapture an audience.

In the last few years, Isak Dinesen has become a cult. Writers are clamouring for permission to enhance their manuscripts by using quotes — or even an entire tale — from her wonderful stories. Every publisher is seeking reprint rights, every playwright to adapt her tales for their plays, every actress to portray one of her characters.

But it was not always so. Fame is fleeting. There was a time when, despite her many loyal fans, her popularity began to wane. After her death in 1962, and with the typical American penchant for adopting instant heroes, other and lesser literary figures began to emerge.

Random House elected not to reprint, and many of her titles were no longer available in this country except in libraries and in private collections.

As my husband's involvement with the Foundation grew, he realized that it was essential to perpetuate her name — that to deny the American public the splendor of her prose would be a crime.

With this in mind, he contacted Dr. Morris Philipson of the University of Chicago Press. Dr. Philipson, a great Dinesen fan, realized the potential for distribution and purchased six titles. These publications met with instant success. Every critic of note vied for the opportunity to review. Random House began to reprint and sales escalated rapidly. Again, Isak Dinesen was a name to be reckoned with.

I began to receive requests for translations from all over the world, even from countries I did not expect would publish; for example: Brazil, Portugal, Argentina, Japan, Israel and others.

With the titles published posthumously by the University of Chicago Press; *Daguerreotypes and Other Essays*, *Carnival* and *Letters from Africa*, Americans again became aware of her power to mesmerize, to entrance.

Consequently, in spite of this age of mediocrity, Isak Dinesen has regained her proper place in the world of letters.

Columbia Studios has contracted for her life story. The screenplay, written by Kurt Luedtke, has been completed and when the film is made I have no doubt that it will be one of the most outstanding events of the decade. Other films based on her stories are currently in production.

I have in my possession an out of print collectors' item published by Random House in 1965 entitled, *Isak Dinesen, A Memorial*. Fifty people, whose names are legion, contributed to the Memorial, and with your permission, I would like to read a few excerpts.

### **Carson McCullers:**

How can one think of a radiant being? I had only seen a picture of her when she was in her twenties: strong, live, wonderfully beautiful, and with one of her Scotch deerhounds in the shade of the African jungle. I had not thought visually about her person. When I met her, she was very, very frail and old. But as she talked her face was lit like a candle in an old church. My heart trembled when I saw her fragility.

When she spoke at the Academy dinner that evening, something happened which I had never seen there before. When she finished her talk, every member rose to applaud her.

### **Clara Svendsen Selborn:**

Everything about her was genuine and authentic, all in one piece. In her essay about feminism and femininity she names as the real reason why women take so much interest in dressing, that a woman's clothes are an extension of her own being. Isak Dinesen had an unfailing eye for style; she would detect it at once if a period costume had a detail wrong. When it was rumored that one of the actresses playing in T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party* was copying her rather closely and she was shown a photograph, her only comment was that she would never have put on that hat with that dress.

## **Hudson Strode:**

Five minutes before the scheduled appointment I went down into the Hotel d'Angleterre's lobby to be on hand to greet her. There, sitting on a small sofa with a half finished cigarette still smoking between her fingers, a woman was regarding me with a quizzical smile. She had the most extraordinary eyes I had ever seen; they were like black diamonds, and set deep. Their brilliance was intensified by long black lashes, black penciled lids, and a powdered complexion without a touch of rouge. Her mouth was painted a dark crimson. She wore a chic black hat with a nose length veil. Her black tweed suit was smartly tailored, and around her shoulders was a fox fur scarf. When she rose, she was not tall, but her slimness, like that of the spear the proud young Masai nomads use for killing lions, made her seem so.

## **Leo Lerman:**

We went to Carnegie Hall. The mobs on the pavement were the kind you see in movies about Hollywood stars attending their own world premieres. When our taxi finally drew up at the curb, the mobs were busy looking this way and that way and shouting.

A throne chair stood upon the stage—a table, a glass of wine. And she was in the chair, in a long, black dress of such simplicity that it had to have been intricately made. She sat there while the overflowing audience stood and accoladed her.

Silence.

The stage seemed jeweled by her presence.

Then she told her stories. She was the storyteller in all of the market places, beside the campfires, crouched upon the hearths of the world. She was the ancient mouth of wisdom itself.

## **Donald Windham:**

Isak Dinesen's charm was as pleasing an anachronism as her writing. She was so particular, so attuned. In person, as in work, she achieved the extraordinary without the flamboyant.

I thought at first, "Oh here is another of those charming women," but I quickly discovered my mistake. Her character, not her charm, triumphed, despite the charm with which she presented it.

There are authors more interesting than their books, and books more interesting than their authors. But there are authors who fittingly compliment their books, and their books them. Isak Dinesen, for example.

## **Clara Svendsen Selborn:**

As a Christian and as the companion sharing Isak Dinesen's days, I would like to add this. In the Bible there are many sayings which call for practical expe-

rience in order to be understood properly—things that cannot be understood unless one is acquainted with animals, others that call for the experience of attending death beds. The jubilant welcoming of spring, as the attitude at death of a human being like Isak Dinesen—Tania spent like a slowly burnt offering, has made me realize the meaning of what I have mechanically repeated so many times, in the DeProfundis: *Copiosa—apud—eum—redemptio; copius—plentius—boundless; “your heart’s desire.”*

### **William J. Smith:**

Karen Blixen, the person, as well as Isak Dinesen, the writer, seemed at once so timeless that her death makes death itself impossible. Because, like Thoreau, she knew how “to read the eternities.” Her answer, always in the classic manner, is eternal.

### **Glenway Wescott:**

What is needed now is all that part of her life story which she herself did not care to tell: the matters of fact and the dates and the details. I beseech her close friends and compatriots to see to this, and soon, lest they forget.

### **Annet Wolf:**

As we are friends and family here, I would like to ask if any of you have any questions that you would like to ask. I know that Birgitte and Judith and Florence will be delighted to answer any question you may have.

Whatever; my personal feeling here tonight is that the people who didn’t get here, missed a lot of wonderful moments. They really did.

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This publication is annotated and indexed in the Historical Abstracts of the American Bibliographical Center.

**Subscriptions:** \$15 a volume. Prices of issues vary, but the total cost of a year's issues is in excess of the annual subscription price.

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